



The

RESTORATION GARDEN

A NOVEL

SARA
BLAYDES

AUTHOR OF THE LAST SECRET OF LILY ADAMS

PRAISE FOR *THE LAST SECRET OF LILY*
ADAMS

“Sara Blaydes’s novel is a wonderfully satisfying mix of mystery, romance, and family drama, alternating between the present day and the Golden Age of Hollywood . . . This is a perfect read for film buffs who enjoy uncovering secrets.”

—*Historical Novels Review*

The
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GARDEN**

ALSO BY SARA BLAYDES

The Last Secret of Lily Adams

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The
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Chapter One

JULIA

Present Day

We were three hours late by the time the taxi turned onto the gravel drive leading to Havenworth Manor. I had no excuse. My plane had landed on time, and the instructions my new employer provided for the rest of the journey were impeccable. But none of my careful preparation had accounted for Sam's meltdown the moment he realized we weren't going home.

He hadn't slept well on the flight over. My iPad and a carefully rationed supply of M&M's kept him calm enough for most of it, but eight hours across the Atlantic was too long to be confined to a cramped space. By the time we reached the baggage carousel, he refused to take another step.

I ignored the dirty looks from other travelers as I carried Sam and our suitcases to the taxi stand. I was used to the judgment of strangers, but I wished I knew how to spare Sam from it. He was too young to understand that all of this was for him. There was nothing left for us back in Chicago. We needed a fresh start, a chance for him to be a kid again away from the shadows of grief.

At least he was sleeping now. The rhythmic patter of rain against the windshield had lulled him to sleep, giving me a moment to take in the surroundings.

The gnarled branches of a wych elm scraped the top of the taxi like hungry fingers as we pulled through the front gate, no leaf buds or bright-purple flowers that should have been abundant on a healthy tree by now. I'd been anticipating disrepair—after all, that was the reason I was here—but not like this. The only sign of life was the sprawling English ivy creeping over the stone wall. The rest of the lawn was nothing more than barren

patches of mud. Even the weeds had decided this was no place to set down their roots.

I wasn't sure this could be called a garden at all.

I pushed that thought aside. Everything could be fixed with a little hard work and determination. I'd staked my entire career on that belief. Historic-garden restoration was a rare specialization. Few professional landscape architects had the desire or patience for this kind of painstaking work, but for me there was nothing more rewarding than unearthing the richness of history lying dormant beneath the soil and breathing it back to life. When I saw the job advertisement looking for an expert gardener to restore the once-famed gardens of Havenworth Manor, I thought it was fate's way of giving me a lifeline after everything that had gone horribly wrong last year. A chance for Sam and me to start over.

In one of her rare moments of honesty, my sister, Rebecca, had told me her dream was to raise Sam in a big house with a huge yard, instead of jumping from one seedy motel to another. The kind of place where he could have a childhood full of nature and freedom. Havenworth wasn't ours, but maybe it could be our home for the next six months.

I winced at the memory of my sister, still unable to separate my anger from the overwhelming grief.

The house, at least, matched the romantic image I'd constructed in my mind: steeply pitched roof, wide staircase at the entry, and even a parapet. The warm stone facade fit perfectly into the lush fields and trees of the expansive countryside around it. The only part that wasn't beautiful was the garden itself.

"This is the place," the taxi driver said with a paternal wariness, as though carving out a chance for me to change my mind and admit this had been a terrible mistake.

"Thank you." I cast him a grateful smile. For better or worse, this was exactly where I needed to be.

The rearview mirror reflected the dismay in his eyes. "That'll be thirty-two quid."

I fumbled with the bills in my wallet, mentally calculating the meager balance of my bank account as I handed them over. But money wasn't the only worry sinking into my chest as the driver popped the trunk and

unloaded our bags. Everything about this job had seemed too good to be true. What if that was because it was?

After Hartwell & Sons fired me, no one was willing to give me a contract. I had the skill but no portfolio of my own to prove I could handle the work without a big firm behind me. I had been almost ready to give up when I was offered the job at Havenworth. A successful restoration of a garden of this importance would prove I was still the best.

As long as I was successful.

I managed to extricate Sam still asleep, but his weight was too heavy for my tired arms. He startled awake as soon as I shifted him to my hip.

“We’re here,” I whispered as the taxi drove off behind us. “Our new adventure.”

Rain landed in thick droplets that clung to his eyelashes as he stared at me in that unsettling way—hopeful yet wary, as though trying to see through the distortion of all the lies I’d told him until now. Before I could reassure him, he wrestled out from my arms and raced up the steps toward the entrance, oblivious to the fears that had rooted my feet to the ground.

“Hang on there.” I gathered our bags and lumbered after him, mud splashing against my shoes. It felt silly to knock at a house this grand and imposing, but there was no doorbell in sight. I picked Sam up and let him bang on the iron knocker. Long seconds passed with no answer. “Maybe they stepped out for a minute.”

We knocked again. This time I had no choice but to concede no one was here. I checked my phone once more. No missed calls or messages. Not even a response to the one I’d sent letting them know I’d be arriving late.

The rain was coming down harder now, and the stone entrance offered no shelter. I fixed an enthusiastic smile to my face to mask my growing panic. “Do you want to run through the hedge maze with me while we wait?”

The barren remains of what must have once been two rather majestic hedge mazes flanked the driveway. I chased Sam through the narrow rows of dying boxwoods, where the rain had turned the gravel paths into murky puddles beneath our feet, wishing I’d had the sense to wear practical shoes instead of dressing to impress my new employers.

Despite the dour weather, it felt good to be outside again. The sound of Sam’s sweet giggles cut through the grayness, casting a light on what these

gardens might have been. What they could be with a little care and attention.

This was a garden where children had once belonged. I could feel it in my soul.

Most people assumed my work was entirely scientific and rational. But gardens were more than proper drainage and balanced pH levels. Reviving a derelict garden required just as much magic as bringing any once-living thing back from the dead.

The faint sound of a car motor peeling up the drive pulled me from my roaming thoughts.

I let out a relieved sigh. Finally. Someone was here.

We followed the maze's twists and turns until we found the opening. Sam bolted ahead, too fast for me to keep up.

As I emerged from the maze, I saw a man step out of a dark-gray Audi. Sam didn't see him, though. "Sam! Slow down!"

My warning came too late. He collided with the man, letting out a terrible cry as he fell back onto the ground.

I ran to him, searching for signs of an injury. "Are you okay?"

"My arm hurts," he said through his tears.

"Let me see," the man said, crouching down next to Sam.

Without waiting for an answer, he took Sam's skinny arm in his hands, gently rotating it and pressing on his wrist. "Does it hurt when I do that?"

Sam shook his head.

"That's good. It means it's not broken. But you must be more careful and pay attention when you're running about."

"I'm so sorry about that," I said hurriedly.

"It's quite all right," the man responded, with a terseness I wasn't expecting after the warmth he'd shown toward Sam. He was slim and tall, with a sharply handsome face and perfectly tailored, expensive gray suit that looked out of place in the wildness of the gardens.

"Julia Esdaile," I said, trying to undo the terrible first impression we'd just made. "No one was here when we arrived, so we decided to explore the grounds while we waited."

"Andrew Morrison," he said, brow furrowing as he shook my hand. I couldn't tell whether there was a hint of contriteness in his annoyed expression. "I apologize for that. I was called into the emergency

department at the last minute. I asked my sister, Helen, to stay and greet you, but it appears she had somewhere else to be.”

Andrew Morrison, the man who had arranged for me to come here on behalf of his godmother. The woman who owned Havenworth. Andrew and I had spoken only once by phone, then done the rest of our correspondence by email. For some reason I hadn’t anticipated him to be so young. His questions had been sharp and direct, but there had been a weariness in his voice. Seeing him now, I thought he couldn’t have been much older than me—somewhere in his late thirties.

“We arrived a bit late,” I said.

“We might as well get you out of this rain.”

To my surprise, he collected my bags for me and carried them inside. I followed behind, clinging to Sam with a viselike hold so he wouldn’t get into any more trouble.

“I’ve arranged a room for you on the east wing of the second floor,” Andrew said as he approached the stairs. “I should warn you, Havenworth Manor is a four-hundred-year-old estate with invaluable history and crumbling walls. It’s not a particularly child-friendly place. It’s important that you watch Sam closely while you are here.”

I held Sam tighter to me, embarrassment flushing my cheeks.

A heavy thump sounded on the stairs above. An elderly woman in a long brown dress and a mass of gray hair coiled in a bun descended the steps, one bony hand gripping the handrail and the other an intricately carved wooden cane. “Nonsense. Havenworth has survived rebellions, plagues, and more than its share of bombs during the Blitz. It can certainly handle a five-year-old child.”

Andrew climbed the stairs to assist her, but she batted his arm away. She continued down the steps slowly, tipping forward precariously each time she set down her cane.

Finally, she reached the relative safety of the wide landing at the bottom of the stairs. Only then did she accept Andrew’s arm, though her attention was squarely on me. “You must be the new landscape architect. I’m Margaret Clarke. It’s lovely to meet you.”

I shook her outstretched hand. Her grip was shockingly strong and sure, despite her tiny stature. “Lovely to meet you, too. I’m Julia and this is Sam.”

She smiled down at him. “Welcome, Sam. We’re delighted to have you at Havenworth. It’s been far too long since there have been any children around here. It will be a nice change.”

I exhaled in relief. “Thank you.”

“Despite my godson’s rudeness, we are quite grateful that you’ve come all this way to help us with the gardens. It’s my understanding that you are exceptionally talented at restoring historic gardens, which is something we desperately need.”

“I’m honored to be here, and I promise you that there is no one else who can do what I do.”

“It will be an immense relief to finally have the gardens attended to by an expert.”

Sam buried his face against my thigh. “I’m tired.”

“Of course you are,” Margaret said kindly. “Andrew, please show Sam and Julia to their room. You can meet us for dinner at six o’clock in the dining room after you’ve had a chance to freshen up.”

“Thank you. That would be lovely.”

We followed Andrew up the wide stairs to a long hallway lined with bookshelves. “I assume you will only need the one room,” he said as he opened the door to reveal a bedroom that was simply furnished with a large bed and a white vanity next to the window.

“This is more than enough. And I really am sorry about your suit.”

I couldn’t tell from his curt nod whether all was forgiven or I was simply being dismissed. I expected him to leave us, but he hesitated at the door. “This project is deeply important to Margaret, and because of that, it’s deeply important to me. It’s vital it be completed with the utmost discretion and care.”

There was a strange hint of vulnerability in his tone that stripped away my instinct to react defensively. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Good. If there’s anything else you need, please let me know.”

“We’ll be fine.”

“Then we will see you at six o’clock. The dining room is on the main floor just to the left of the entrance.”

I shut the door and closed my eyes, letting out a shaky breath as the exhaustion from the long day finally caught up with me. This job was going to be so much harder than I’d thought.

A small tug at my pant leg shook me from my thoughts. I looked at Sam with his big round eyes and downy blond hair, still awed by how much I could love someone I had only known for such a short time.

I forced a small smile, knowing he was worried about me. “I’m okay. Just tired. What do you think about this place? Did we make a good choice coming here?”

He nodded eagerly. Whether it was to please me or because he genuinely meant it, I didn’t know. But it would be okay. It had to be okay. I was going to fix this garden. And then, somehow, I would find a way to fix my life, too.